

Influences on Health

In Bang Chan, a discussion of sickness and health merely in terms of element balance would be true but insufficient, or even superficial. After all, whether manipulated by oneself or by a professional curer, elements could only be controlled within certain limits. Far deeper questions were posed, probing the ultimate nature of health, life, and death. What determined the particular proportions of a person's elements with which he had been born, and whether he had, say, a preponderance of wood from Jupiter or gold from Venus? The immediate answer of astrological confluences on the date of birth would be true, for each day had its own qualities and aspects, but it was not enough. Why had he been born on that date to that set of governing factors? In life, why did one person meet the circumstances that created illness, while another lived in glorious health? The answers to these questions must be sought in the Buddhist moral and cosmic beliefs.

The Buddhist universe operated on a principle of immutable law. Each person received his just due, suffering for his own sins, enjoying reward for his virtue. There was no personified deity to help, forgive, or blame. Moreover, attachments were the cause of sorrow. Because existence was fraught with desires, all life was basically painful. Even flashes of happiness by their cessation caused sorrow.

In this universe and on this earth, individuals, each a unique and independent entity, were born to live and die, over and over again, throughout eons of time. They bore no relation to each other. Separate and autonomous, each was in charge of his own destiny. All beings formed a single grand scale of existence from demons in hell, through such lowly creatures as worms and insects, upward through dogs, cats, buffaloes, and elephants to mankind, then on up to angels and gods in the last paradise before the peace of Nibbhan (Nirvana).

The insight of the Buddha showed the way to break the sorrowful eternal cycle of rebirth and reach Nibbhan. The Buddha perceived that meritorious behavior caused one to progress up this ladder of existence toward freedom from incarnation. In each life merit (*pun*) could be accumulated by compassionate behavior: caring for priests, and being kind and generous to persons less able to care for themselves. With merit one's next life was happier and freer of restrictions. A dog had more merit than a worm, a buffalo than a dog.

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love philters, and they might be "sealed up" in childbirth or attacked by khun, their capacities to "liana" were inalienable. If any woman tried to temper with men's magic, a severe sanction fell on her. She became the host of the ph. kras who lived from faeces like a dog.⁵⁹ On the other hand in a legendary case a man who tried to perform one of the women's rites to the Rice Mother was destroyed.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Buddhist sanction of sinfulness fell on any man using magic for evil purposes.

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The single channel where women might operate in the men's field of curing, power, clairvoyance, etc. was as a medium (khon sang), through possession by a spirit. If possessed by a male ph, she could do everything a ph could do. Men were never mediums. Sang Chan's only medium was possessed by a male ph.⁶¹ During seances she talked and eat like a man, and gave out cures and advice to an eager clientele. Only while wearing the yellow robe of an ordained priest did a man enjoy a generalized eufunction comparable to a woman's nurturing capacity. His powers in many respects were far greater than hers, but limited in her special province.

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59. My finding is based on Textor's interesting facts (pp. 185-186). He described the hosts of ph. kras as married women ("never a maiden") in their 30's or 40's, who were "invariably" trying to learn love magic. Such women were, however, violating their sexual function as nurturant and worse, their status as "am" women, ritually established by the Holy fire! Detraction by the community, implemented by fear of contagion through spittle, lasted even unto the deathbed. The ph. kras's daughter alone was immune while giving the devoted care which was every mother's due in her old age, for Sang Chan desired no alienation of this filial duty even out of fear of the terrible sanction on the mother.

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60. The legend ran that once a man instead of a woman went into the rice field to perform the ritual inviting of the Rice Goddess to stay there and be cared for with food and offerings during her pregnancy. The goddess he met was not an immature and tender child-like spirit, but the adult, pregnant being who was powerful, flirtatious, and frightening. Dazzled by her beauty he fell in love with her, and ran away with her, vanishing forever. The goddess, affronted because an improper person arrived to deal with her, destroyed him.

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61. In Bangkok, monkey, cats, or spirits may also possess women.